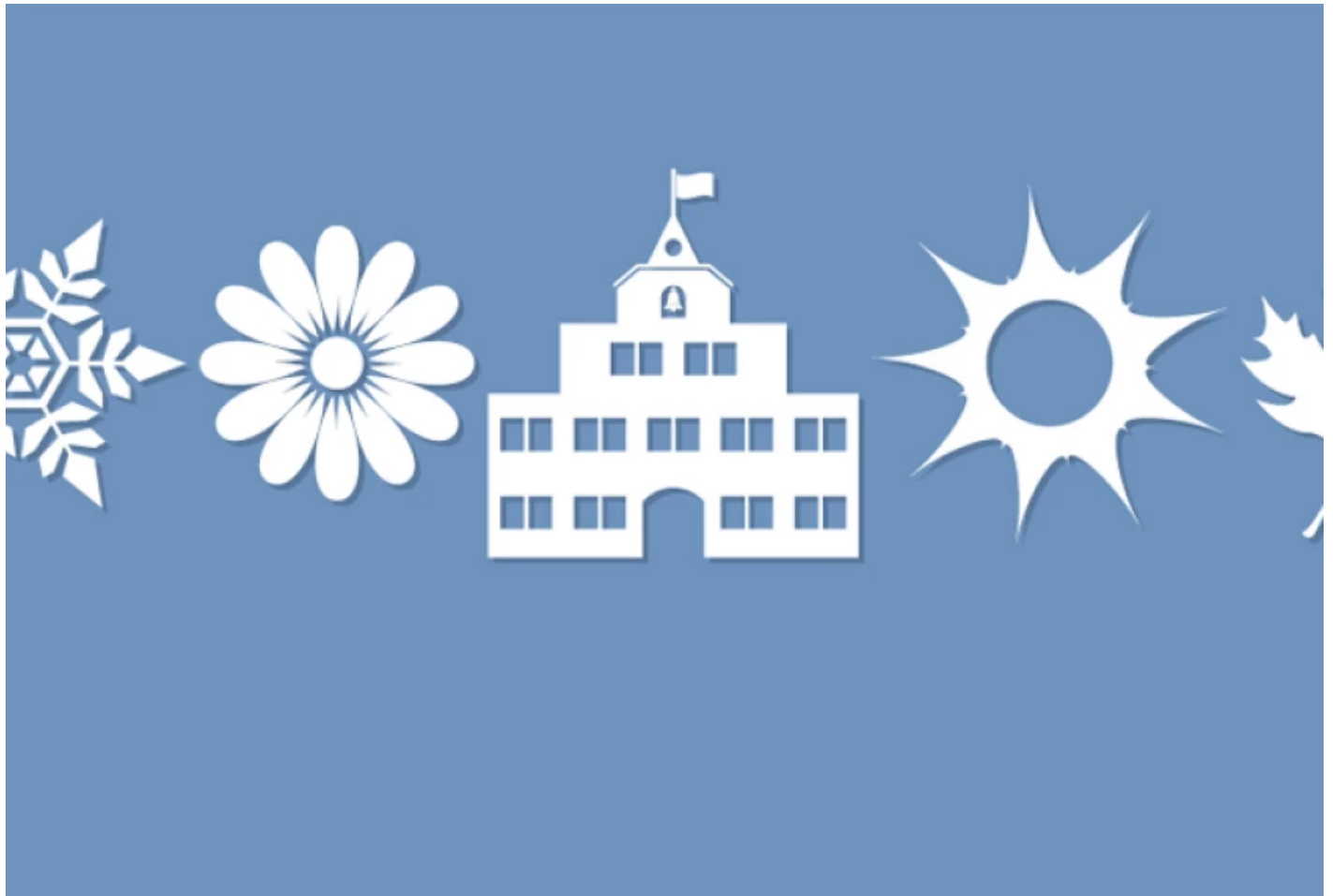


SCHOOL & DISTRICT MANAGEMENT EXPLAINER

Year-Round Schooling Explained

By Jaclyn Zubrzycki — December 18, 2015 ⌚ 7 min read



Clarification: An earlier version of this article misstated the percent increase in the number of year-

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At more than 3,000 K-12 campuses around the country, school's not necessarily out for the summer.

Year-round schooling, in which a single summer break is swapped out for a series of shorter breaks throughout the year, has become increasingly common, both as an academic improvement strategy and as a solution to overcrowding.

Year-round schooling inspires strong reactions. Advocates argue, among other things, that it can stem summer learning loss, reduce teacher and student burnout, and help working parents manage schedules. Opponents counter that it complicates schedules for parents, takes a financial toll on districts and tourist economies, deprives children of a needed respite from the classroom, and distracts from other, more effective school improvement strategies.

The idea of changing the school year's structure has surfaced in national policy conversations since at least the 1970s. A landmark 1994 report from the National Education Commission on Time and Learning describes the nation's schools as "Prisoners of Time" and advocates for more schools to break away from the traditional Labor Day-to-Memorial Day school year. More recently, a 2014 study by the Congressional Research Service, which provides policy and legal analysis to the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate, surveyed the research and the state of year-round schooling around the country.

Year-round schooling is not necessarily the same as expanded learning time, which entails lengthening school days or the school year. Many year-round schools simply reorganize the standard 180-day school year.

Here are some answers to common questions about year-round school:

Year-Round Schooling: The Pros

Year-round education is sometimes introduced as an academic remedy and sometimes as a logistical necessity. Advocates for both often describe the traditional school year as outdated, based on an agrarian calendar, and not suited to modern society's needs or structure.

The academic argument for year-round school centers around preventing the so-called summer

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In other school systems—primarily those looking to avoid overcrowded classrooms—schools and districts organize students into different tracks in order to maximize the use of building space.

In both cases, advocates often point to side benefits of having a school open year-round. In an era when schools are often hubs for health care and other services, year-round schools have the added perk of allowing access to such services to continue throughout the calendar year. Some also argue that offering more regular breaks prevents burnout of both teachers and students. Several federal programs, including the School Improvement Grant program and waivers from the requirements of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, have offered financial incentives for expanded learning time. That includes some, but not all, year-round schools.

Year-Round Schooling: The Cons

A major thread of argument against year-round schooling as an academic intervention is basically: If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Since research is mixed as to whether or not year-round schooling actually helps students, the logistical barriers mean it's not worth a change, according to this line of thinking.

Others cite the financial toll involved in switching the calendar. Tourism and other industries that count on summer vacationers might suffer. High schoolers might be less able to get summer jobs. And the transition can bring added costs to school districts, which have to pay for (and sometimes install) utilities in buildings, stipends for teachers, or other associated expenses.

Still others argue that year-round schooling burdens parents, and takes away from students' time to experience anything outside of the classroom, and reduces teachers' time for professional development and growth. In districts where some schools are year-round and others are traditional, families may have to juggle conflicting schedules.

Statistics: How Many Year-Round Schools Are There? Is the Idea Becoming More Popular?

During the 2011-12 school year, the most recent year for which data is available, about 4 percent of public schools were operating on a year-round schedule, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. That's 3,700 schools, 400 of which are charter schools.

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That's a marked increase from 1986, when just 408 schools overall were on a year-round schedule. The number of year-round schools increased by 20.6 percent between the 2006-07 and 2011-12 school years. The Congressional Research Service reports that year-round schools are more common in the South and West than in the Northeast and Midwest.

The growth in part reflects the traction the idea has gained with state and federal lawmakers in recent years and the increasing availability of funding to support new schedules. The National Association for Year-Round Education, which advocates for and collects research on the topic, was also resurrected in 2015 after an eight-year hiatus.

At the same time, some districts that adopted year-round schedules in the past have changed course. The Los Angeles school district, which embraced year-round schooling as the city's population boomed in the 1980s, had just one school that remained on a year-round schedule by 2015.

The Schedule: How Year-Round Schools Work

Instead of having one long summer break, year-round schools break the academic year up with several medium-sized (think two- or three-week) vacations. This is often referred to as a balanced calendar.

The length of breaks and marking periods vary. Some schools have four 45-day sessions followed by 15-day breaks; others have three 60-day academic sessions followed by 20 days of break; and some have two 90-day sessions and two 30-day breaks.

Other schools extend the school year as well as shifting the schedule, sometimes by adding an "intersession" period of a week or two, during which students take academic courses that are outside their normal courseload. The Congressional Research Service found that the average year-round school is open 189 days per year—nine days longer than the standard 180-day year.

Schools in which the entire student body is on a single year-round calendar are called single-track schools. In other schools, especially where year-round schooling has been adopted to reduce overcrowding, groups of students at the same school have different academic calendars. This is referred to as multitracking.

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The academic case for year-round school stems from studies that show that the achievement gap between low-income students and their higher-income peers is exacerbated during the summer. But the current research on the academic impact of year-round calendars is inconclusive. One meta-analysis of research from the University of Minnesota, published in 1999, found that 42 studies showed no positive impact from year-round school, while 27 studies showed a significant positive impact. The authors determined that the overall impact was positive, but cautioned that most research on the topic did not control for other relevant factors, such as students' socioeconomic status.

A review in 2003 also found a small positive impact from year-round learning. The authors of that review also raised concerns about the quality of relevant research.

A 2015 study indicates that more advanced students were more likely to benefit from additional days in school than their peers who struggled academically. And a 2005 study of multitruacked schools in California found that students were more often tracked along racial and ability levels than in schools with traditional calendars.

Glossary of Terms

- **Year-round school:** An approach to school calendars in which instructional days are spread over the course of the entire year, instead of broken up by a single long summer break. Some year-round schools have longer-than-average school years; others spread the standard number of days over a longer stretch of time.
- **Extended school year:** A school year that has more than the traditional 180 days of instructional time. An extended school year may also be a year-round school, or it may have a traditional long summer break that is shorter.
- **Expanded learning time:** Adding either hours to the school day or days to the school calendar, usually as part of an effort to improve academics. The federal government first included a definition of expanded learning time in the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015.
- **Balanced Calendar:** An approach to structuring the school calendar in which longer periods of time off are spread throughout the year instead of concentrated in a long summer break. An example would include a school with three 60-day academic sessions and 20-day breaks.
- **Single-track school:** A school in which all students and teachers use the same calendar.
- **Multi-track school:** A school in which courses and students are organized into groups that operate on distinct schedules. Usually used as a way to maximize the use of limited space.

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Jaclyn Zubrzycki formerly wrote for Education Week.

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- [“The Congressional Research Service: Year-Round Schools: In Brief,”](#) by Rebecca Skinner, a specialist in education policy highlights the current state of year-round schools. June 9, 2014.
- [“Prisoners of Time, Report of the National Education Commission on Time and Learning,”](#) 1994, encourages schools to consider changing the traditional schedule.
- [“Year-Round Learning Continuity in Education Across Settings and Time Through Expanded Learning Opportunities,”](#) by the Harvard Family Research Project, December 2012.
- [“Center on Education Policy, Expanded Learning Time: A Summary of Findings from Case Studies in Four States.”](#) January 2015.

Education Week Resources

- [Education Week’s Time and Learning blog](#)
- [“Popularity Grows Anew for Year-Round Schooling,”](#) by Madeline Will. States including Michigan and Virginia set aside money for year-round schools.
- [“New Law Encourages Year-Round Expanded Learning in California,”](#) by Kathryn Baron, 9/19/2014. California’s governor approves new standards for expanded-learning programs and reprioritizes funding to provide incentives for before- and after-school programs to go year round.
- [“Extra School Days Help High Flyers More Than Struggling Students,”](#) by Jaclyn Zubrzycki. Research found that students who were already doing well in school seem to benefit more from extra time in school than their peers who were already struggling.
- [“New York Awards Grants for Extended Learning Time to Nine Districts,”](#) by Samantha Stainburn. A state program provides funding to states that increase the length of their school day or year by 25 percent.
- [The “Education Futures” Commentary series on year-round schools](#)

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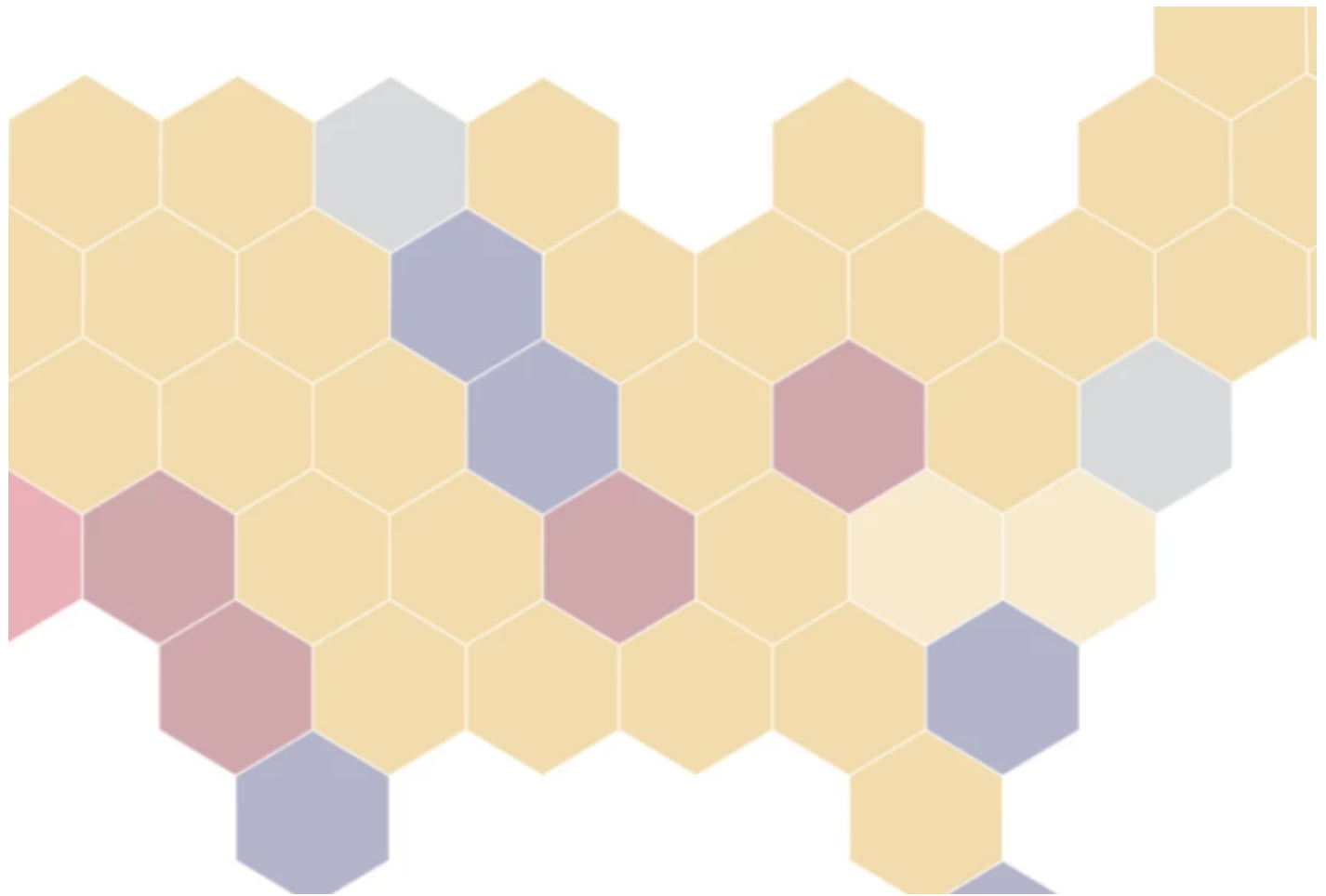
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